Karbala

A MARSIYA OF MIR ANIS

DAVID MATTHEWS

THE BATTLE OF KARBALA

A MARSIYA OF ANIS

Translated into English Verse
with an Introduction
by

DAVID MATTHEWS

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Introduction and translation
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Preface

The Urdu *marsiya*, a long poem written on the subject of the Battle of Karbala and the martyrdom of Husain, reached its highest stage of development in Lucknow during the first half of the 19th century. One of the finest exponents of the genre was Mir Babar 'Ali Anis, who came from a long line of distinguished Urdu poets, who originated from Delhi. In this book one of Anis's best-known *marsiyas*: *Jab qat' ki masafat i shab afiak ne* has been translated into English verse. The poem presents an account of the events of the 10th day of the month of Muharram, beginning with Husain's preparations for the final battle at Karbala, and culminating in his death and the capture of those who were left of his family.

The art of the *marsiya* was cultivated mainly, though not exclusively, by Shi'a Muslims, and the poems were recited at the gatherings, which take place over the first ten days of Muharram, when the story of Karbala is recounted and mourning for the death of Husain, regarded by the Shi'as as the third and greatest Imam, takes place. The interpretation of the historical events is made from a typically Shi'a point of view, casting Husain and his valiant

band of followers as the true heirs of the Holy Prophet, who have justice on their side, and the Umayyad enemy, led by the Caliph Yazid, as wicked, unprincipled usurpers of Husain's rightful place. The main object of the poet was to arouse the emotions of a cultivated and discerning audience with his powers of oratory. From the point of view of language and style, therefore, the *marsiya* is a very grand composition, which employs the fine diction and figures of speech of classical Urdu verse.

In the subcontinent, Muharram is still one of the great annual events of the Shi'a calendar, and many of its traditions and acts of mourning are peculiar to that part of the world. Nothing really comparable to the *marsiya*, which forms an important element of the celebration, is found in the Islamic literatures of Arabic and Persian.

Anis is regarded as one of the finest classical Urdu poets, and it is hoped that this translation goes some way at least in doing justice to his art and poetic skill.

London, 1994 David Matthews

The Urdu *Marsiya* and the Battle of Karbala

The Arabic word *marsiya* means 'elegy' and the term was originally applied to a poem of any length written to commemorate or mourn someone's death. However, the Urdu *marsiya*, as we know it from the works of the 19th century Lucknow poet, Anis, and his contemporaries, is a lengthy narrative poem devoted to the martyrdom of Husain at Karbala in 679 A.D. and the events which led up to and which occurred during the famous battle. This form of composition, written at the time when the language had reached its highest stage of development, is unique to Urdu, and nothing really comparable can be found in the literatures of Arabic and Persian, which at all times had provided Urdu writers with inspiration.

The *marsiya*, which has been translated in this book into English verse, is one of the best known of the hundreds of compositions of Mir Babar Ali Anis (1803-1874), who is regarded as probably the greatest exponent of the genre.

It gives an account, in traditional Lucknow poetic style, of the events which took place on the tenth day of the month of Muharram, beginning with the preparations for battle at dawn and culminating with the death of its hero, Husain, in the evening. The story would, of course, be well known to the committed Shi'a audience before whom it was destined to be recited, and the poet makes little attempt to present a completely unbiased historical account. His purpose was to stir the hearts and emotions of those meeting to mourn the death of their Lord, Husain, who, as they saw it was unjustly slaughtered and robbed of his rightful position by the army of his wicked and unprincipled enemy, Yazid.

Most of the great *marsiya* writers were themselves Shi'as, and before going on to discuss the nature of the poetry and the role it played in society, it will be well to consider the historical background and the interpretation Shi'a writers put upon it. The historical events which led up to the battle of Karbala have been reliably reported by Arab writers, and the facts are incontrovertible. In any unprejudiced account they will always be the same. However, the assessment of the events and of the character of the men who played a leading role in them differ greatly in many Sunni and Shi'a versions. The following summary attempts to look at Karbala from a moderate and largely typical Shi'a point of view, the one usually reflected in the works of 19th century Urdu *marsiya* writers.

During his lifetime, the Prophet Muhammad, who belonged to the Quraish tribe, had not designated a successor, though

many of the Arabs believed that he had intended that his kinsman, Ali, should take his place when he died. The speech made to the assembly at Khumm, in which Muhammad declared that 'Ali is to me what Aaron was to Moses', left no doubt in the minds of some people that this was the case. Once when he was ill, however, Muhammad asked his great friend and helper, Abu Bakr, to lead the prayers in his stead, perhaps indicating a different choice. When the Prophet died, the question of the succession was still undecided. The family of Hashim (Muhammad's great-grandfather) was in favour of 'Ali. The rest of the Quraish tribe insisted on an election, in keeping with the democratic spirit of Islam. The result was that Abu Bakr, already an old man, was chosen as Caliph (the Arabic word *khalifa* meaning 'successor'). 'Ali, a man with a strong sense of justice, accepted the majority decision without complaint as he did twice more when 'Umar and 'Usman were subsequently chosen for the caliphate.

Abu Bakr and 'Umar discharged their duties fairly and competently, doing much to consolidate and extend the Islamic faith and its dominion. The third Caliph, 'Usman, was too old and weak-willed to govern effectively, and is thought by many to have been poorly fitted for the increasingly responsible position. He appointed his self-seeking nephew, Mirvan, as his minister, giving him almost complete freedom of action. Mirvan appointed Mu'avia, the son of the Umayyad, Abu Sufiyan (an old enemy of Muhammad) to the governorship of the rich province of Syria, and the drunkard, Valid, to the governorship of Kufa

in Iraq. It is said that Valid was often so drunk that he had to be helped to the pulpit, and could begin the prayer only when he had his fill of wine. Mu'avia tyrannised his Syrian subjects, extorting money from them, all the time with his eye on gaining the caliphate, which in view of Usman's declining state of health, would soon fall vacant.

Complaints about the governors began to reach the Caliph from Syria and Iraq, and finally a large deputation arrived in Medina seeking redress. 'Usman was undecided, but 'Ali characteristically came to his aid and promised the deputation that the complaint would be dealt with. He instructed the Caliph to give them a written guarantee, and they left Medina satisfied. In the meantime, Mirvan sent instructions to Mu'avia to have them murdered as soon as they returned. The party had gone only a short distance from Medina when they found out what was in store for them, and angered by the treachery, returned and killed 'Usman. In the ensuing turmoil, 'Ali was unanimously elected to the caliphate and humbly accepted saying that he would gladly step down if anyone more suitable could be found.

One of his first (and perhaps unwise) moves was to set about removing from office all those whom 'Usman had appointed. Mu'avia was naturally unwilling to vacate his lucrative position and revolted. 'Ali's brave and intrepid friend, Malik ul-Ushtar, routed Mu'avia's army several times, and was on the point of victory, when Mu'avia appeared with the pages of the Quran attached to his spear. In a passionate speech he appealed to the Arabs not to defeat him, pointing out that the Turks and Persians, who stood

at his frontiers, would take the opportunity to advance against the Arabs. A truce was arranged. Malik ul-Ushtar was recalled and 'Ali accepted that the matter should be put to arbitration. Some of Ali's followers (the *Khavarij* or Kharijites) disagreed with the principle of arbitration, saying that God was the only arbitrator, and withdrew their support. There was a tacit agreement between the two sides that neither 'Ali nor Mu'avia should be given the caliphate, and this decision was adhered to by 'Ali's spokesmen. 'Ali was thus deposed, whereas Mu'avia's henchman, Amr ibn ul-As, strongly urged that Mu'avia should be made Caliph. Some time later, 'Ali was assassinated while saying his prayers in a mosque at Kufa. With his dying breath, Ali asked that his murderer should be struck only once and not tortured.

Ali's eldest son, the quiet and sweet-voiced Hasan, was raised to the caliphate after his father's death. Mu'avia once more decided to fight, but in order to put an end to the quarrel, Hasan resigned, or according to some sources was poisoned, presumably on the orders of Mu'avia, who became Caliph in Hasan's place.

Mu'avia, it is said, was a tyrant and a murderer, stopping at nothing to reach his goal. During his brief reign, nepotism and oligarchy replaced the newly established democracy, and the old pagan practices gradually returned. Before his death, he nominated his son, Yazid, to succeed him, breaking his promise to reserve the caliphate for 'Ali's younger son, Husain.

All Muslims—both Sunni and Shi'a—are united in their

condemnation of Yazid. As Ameer Ali in his book *The Spirit of Islam* puts it, 'His depraved nature knew no pity or justice. He killed and tortured for the pleasure he derived from human suffering. Addicted to the grossest of vices, his boon companions were the most abandoned of both sexes. Such was the Caliph—the Commander of the Faithful.'

At last, the people of Kufa, tired of the excesses of Yazid, sent messages to Husain asking him for his help against the wicked Caliph. Husain decided to respond and sent his cousin, Muslim, the son of 'Aqil, to Kufa to assess the situation. Muslim sent a letter to Husain assuring him that the majority of the Kufans were on his side. On receiving the letter, Husain made preparations to depart. Meanwhile, the governor of Kufa, 'Ubaidullah ibn Ziyad, discovered Muslim's intentions and had him arrested. One by one his frightened supporters in Kufa deserted him.

Husain, accompanied by his valiant half-brother, 'Abbas, and a number of his family—mostly the women and children—had crossed the Arabian desert and entered Iraq when he heard what had happened to Muslim. Although he realised that he would receive no help from the Kufans, and if he met Yazid's army, he would be hopelessly outnumbered, he continued his advance, desiring only that right and justice should be done.

On the third of Muharram (the first month of the Islamic year), Husain and his pathetic band of friends reached a place called Karbala on the banks of the Euphrates, and was soon overtaken by the brutal and ferocious 'Ubaidullah ibn Ziyad. Although the Umayyad army numbered

thousands, they would not dare come within reach of 'Ali's miraculous sword, Zulfiqar, but lay in ambush, finally managing to cut Husain off from the water.

In this intolerable situation, Husain offered the option of three conditions: that he should be allowed to return unmolested to Medina; or to be sent to the frontier against the Turks; or that he should be conducted safely to Yazid for talks. This last option, however, is denied by some Shi'a writers who argue that no such compromise was necessary.

'Ubaidullah ibn Ziyad insisted that Husain acknowledge his guilt, and come to stand in front of the Caliph as a rebel against Umayyad rule. As a last resort, Husain begged the enemy to kill him, but to spare the lives of his family and friends. Overcome by pity for Husain and horrified by the thought of making war on the grandson of the Holy Prophet, Hur, the leader of Yazid's cavalry, crossed the battle lines and joined Husain, pleading with others to do the same. 'Ubaidullah ibn Ziyad was implacable, and ordered his men to prepare for battle.

Fighting began after the morning prayers on the 10th of Muharram, and continued until Husain was left alone to defend his helpless family. He entered his tent, and as he took his small son, 'Ali Asghar, in his arms, an arrow came from the enemy side and pierced the baby's neck. Wounded and bleeding, Husain made one last attempt against the enemy, who fell back as he rushed upon them. When he could do no more, he fell down; the cowardly army, led by Sinan, surrounded him, cut off his head and carried it triumphantly on a pole to Kufa. The women were rounded

up and sent off to Syria, where Yazid awaited them. All the male members of Husain's army perished, except a small son, 'Ali Zain ul Abidin, whom Husain's sister, Zainab, saved from the massacre. Zain ul 'Abidin (born to the daughter of Yadzjard, the last Sassanian king of Persia) is recognised by the Shi'as as their fourth Imam or spiritual leader.

The Umayyads ruled from Damascus for almost a century, in the opinion of some, committing the most terrible and revolting atrocities. Those who had helped Husain were murdered or driven into exile, and Medina was sacked. In the words of Ameer Ali: 'The city which had sheltered the Prophet from the persecutions of the idolaters . . . the hallowed ground he had trod in life, and every inch of which was sanctified by his holy work and ministry was foully desecrated . . . The public mosque was turned into a stable, the shrines demolished for the sake of their ornaments. During the whole period of Umayyad domination, the Holy City remained a haunt for wild beasts. The paganism of Mecca was once more triumphant.'

The above account of Karbala reflects the point of view of the Shi'a *marsiya* writers of Lucknow. It should be pointed out, however, that many Sunnis would not accept the account of 'Usman's reign nor the assessment of Mu'avia's character, though would usually agree that he was wrong in making Yazid his heir. 'Ali is revered by Sunnis and Shi'as alike, and the death of Husain is universally deplored, and indeed may be equally mourned by Sunnis during Muharram. According to some Sunni accounts, Yazid was also sorry

that Husain had been murdered, and cursed ibn Ziyad for so ill-treating him. On the other hand, some Shi'as go farther and condemn the first three Caliphs outright, who by them are regarded as usurpers of 'Ali's right. In general, the Urdu *marsiya* writers present very extreme views. They see no good whatsoever in Yazid and his followers, who are painted in the blackest possible colours. On the other hand, Husain and his family are given heavenly, even divine, characteristics, and are incapable of saying or doing any wrong at all.

Anis and the Urdu *Marsiya*

Mir Babar 'Ali Anis was born in Faizabad in 1803 A.D. to a distinguished and prosperous family. His great-grandfather, Mir Ghulam Husain Zahik, a contemporary of the famous Urdu poets, Sauda and Mir, was renowned in Delhi for his satirical and humorous verse, and was made the subject of a number of Sauda's satirical poems. Like many of the 18th-century Urdu poets, who depended for their livelihood on the patronage of the nobles, Mir Zahik migrated to Faizabad, which after the collapse of the Delhi administration was rapidly becoming a rich cultural centre.

Mir Zahik was accompanied by his son, Mir Ghulam Hasan (Anis's grandfather), the author of the famous *masnavi*, *Sihr ul Bayan* 'The Magic Story'. Mir Hasan also wrote a *divan* of Urdu poetry, which during his lifetime was much admired. When Navvab Asaf ud Daula transferred his capital from Faizabad to nearby Lucknow, where the enormous

Imambara was erected, Mir Hasan changed his residence, and for the rest of his life lived comfortably in Lucknow, a city ruled by a Shi'a dynasty, which soon established itself as the major focus for Urdu letters. He died in 1795 A.D.

Mir Hasan's son, Mir Mustahassan Khaliq (Anis's father) was highly regarded in his time as an Urdu poet, and received his instruction from Mushafi, the poetic mentor or *ustad* of the influential Navvab Sulaiman Shakoh. Although, like other Urdu poets, he composed *ghazals* and other forms of lyric poetry, he is chiefly renowned for his *marsiyas* which were rapidly becoming an integral part of the Muharram celebrations in Lucknow. Among his contemporaries were other famous *marsiya* writers like Mir Zamir, Miyan Dilgir and Mirza Fasih, whose works are still available, but now read largely by a select band of Shi'a devotees. Mir Khaliq, however, is said to have surpassed them all. The art of *marsiyagoi* (the composition and recitation of elegies for Husain) was cultivated by the family, and Anis had two illustrious brothers, Mir Uns and Mir Munis, who also excelled in it. It seems that the Urdu *marsiya* in the form that we know it dated from this time.

As is often the case with famous Urdu writers, little is known of Anis's early life. He was no doubt given a traditional Shi'a education in Faizabad and Lucknow, and it is clear from his poetry that he had a vast knowledge of Arabic and Persian, as well as the colloquial forms of his mother tongue. One of his favourite devices is to use 'Hindi', Persian and Arabic words, which are near synonyms, in the same line or verse. Such display of one's command

over the language was greatly admired, and is a feature commonly found in the works of many Lucknow poets. He was equally conversant with the details of Arab and Persian history, especially those to which the Shi'as give prominence, and delights in referring to them in his verse.

It is known that Anis studied with two great teachers of his time—Maulvi Najaf 'Ali, a Shi'a expert in Islamic jurisprudence, and Maulana Haidar 'Ali, a Sunni theologian. Nowhere does he mention the name of any poetic *ustad*, but one imagines that his early verses would have been checked by his father, to whom he refers affectionately.

Anis, like the rest of his family, was a Shi'a by persuasion, and it is known that both of his parents were religiously inclined. He seems to have been particularly attached to his mother, whose company and speech may have inspired certain passages in his *marsiyas*. For example, the way in which Zainab gently rebukes her two boys, 'Aun and Muhammad, is reminiscent of the language employed by the women of Lucknow (verses 59ff). That Anis was an ardent believer is shown by the obvious sincerity of his verse and by the great respect he shows towards his heroes.

The majority of the Shi'as, of course, firmly believe that 'Ali was Muhammad's rightful successor, and is thus regarded not as the fourth Caliph but as the first Imam or 'Leader'. Many Shi'as, in fact, do not recognise the legitimacy of the first three Caliphs at all. Muhammad, 'Ali, Fatima (Muhammad's daughter and 'Ali's wife), Hasan and Husain ('Ali's two sons) are held in special respect, and are referred to as the *panjtan* 'The Five Holy Ones'. They along with

the other nine Imams, who succeeded Husain, are known as 'The Fourteen Innocent Ones', and are thought to have control over the world and the laws of nature. Although in this respect all the Imams are equal and are all thought to be completely infallible, 'Ali and Husain, the first and third Imams respectively, are in practice given greater prominence by the Shi'as. The 12th Imam, Muhammad ul Mahdi, is said to have disappeared from the world in 880 A.D., and will, according to Shi'a belief, return to restore justice before the Day of Judgement.

The defeat and death (or according to both Shi'as and Sunnis the 'martyrdom') of Husain at the hands of the evil Yazid at Karbala was a great blow to those who supported his cause. The Shi'as refused to recognise the Caliphs after 'Ali, but instead gave their allegiance to the 12 Imams. Now many Shi'as look upon the battle of Karbala not as a mere political reversal but as a deeply felt personal tragedy, in which wickedness triumphed over good. In the *marsiyas*, which relate the story, therefore, Yazid and his men are painted utterly black, while Husain and his faction are regarded as being completely beyond reproach. In general, no attempt whatsoever is made to analyse or balance the historical facts, which are interpreted solely from one point of view. According to the *marsiya* writers, 'Ali and Hasan were both murdered in the most cowardly fashion, leaving only Husain to protect his family, who were cut off from the waters of the Euphrates. With God and Muhammad on his side and with Zulfiqar, the miraculous sword of 'Ali in his possession, Husain could not fail to win the battle,

and it was only when *he* chose to lay down his arms at divine behest that the enemy could defeat him.

The events leading up to Karbala took place during the first 10 days of Muharram, the first month of the Muslim year, and it is at this time that the mourning for the death of Husain (*'azadari*) is carried out. For a convinced Shi'a, Muharram is second only in importance to Ramadan, and by some may be considered even more important. During these 10 days, each morning a meeting or *majlis* is attended often by thousands of people who congregate to hear the events of Karbala related by a *zakir* or professional reciter. Some of the finest *zakirs* have received their training in the prestigious colleges of Iran and Iraq and can speak with great authority and learning for hours at a time. Usually, before the *zakir*'s sermon, *marsiyas* and other shorter verse compositions are recited by well-known poets of the city. The audience needs no encouragement to participate, and, as is the case in Urdu *musha'iras*, will give their loud approval to a particularly moving or clever verse. In Lucknow, such gatherings are by no means restricted to the Shi'a faithful, and both Sunni and Hindu poets are welcome to recite their compositions.

Since the time of Anis, *marsiyas* have usually been written in six-line stanzas, the last two lines of each stanza making a particularly forceful or pathetic point. The last verse of the stanza is usually the cue for those listening to beat their breasts or slap their heads and call upon the name of Husain: *Ya Husain, Ya Husain*. In order to evoke the desired reaction from the audience, undisguised pathos is

an essential ingredient of the *marsiya* and its related genres.

In general, women do not appear in the main body of the congregation, but listen behind a curtain or a wall specially erected for the purpose. *Majlises* may be large-scale public affairs or small intimate gatherings in private houses, to which friends and acquaintances of the host are invited. Wherever they are arranged, the same kinds of verse are recited. Increasingly less frequent are the renditions of *soz*, a short poem set to a classical Indian raga, in which the singer is accompanied either by a musical instrument or a second voice. Many orthodox Muslims, who find music anathema in worship, deplore the practice of *soz*, and for this reason the art is dying out. Since women cannot openly participate in public, or even in private *majlises* where men are present, they often arrange their own meetings, sometimes composing and reciting verse in their own dialect, such as Avadhi, which is spoken in the villages around Lucknow.

The celebration of the events of Karbala and organised public mourning for the death of Husain were well established in India long before the time of Anis. Muharram was given great prominence by the Sultans of the Deccan during the 16th and 17th centuries, who themselves composed short *marsiyas* for recitation at *majlises* in Bijapur and Golkunda/Hyderabad. One of the earliest Urdu compositions we possess is the *Nausarhar* ('Nine Sections'), written by the Ahmadnagar poet, Ashraf, in the first half of the 16th century. Those composed by the Deccan Sultans, Muhammad Quli Quth Shah and 'Ali 'Adil Shah, in form

and rhyme scheme resemble the Urdu *ghazal*, a short lyric consisting of ten to twelve verses. Longer poems on the subject of Karbala, written in stanza form with the poignancy expressed in the last verse, date from the late Deccan period towards the end of the 17th century. One may, therefore, assume that the tradition of composing *marsiyas* in Urdu was transmitted, like certain other forms of verse to the north of India during the early 18th century after the fall of the Deccan kingdoms and the rise of Delhi as the new cultural centre. It is not certain whether Anis's great-grandfather ever composed *marsiyas*, but his grandfather, Mir Hasan, certainly did.

The development of the *marsiya* from a short lyrical poem expressing grief for the death of Husain into a lengthy narrative poem, in which the whole story of the battle and the various events contained in it are treated in great detail, seems to have taken place mainly in Faizabad and Lucknow during the last part of the 18th and early part of the 19th centuries, when the opulent Shi'a rulers, whose ancestors had come from Iran, provided the stimulus and the money for celebrations to be organized on a grand scale. The events, which take place in Lucknow, Hyderabad (where the old Qutb Shahi standards and banners are still in existence) and other large Indian and Pakistani cities, are unparalleled in any other part of the Islamic world. Even the well-known 'passion-play' which is staged at Kazimain in Iraq has no real connection with the *'azadari* of the subcontinent.

As we have pointed out, *marsiyas* were composed mostly

(though not exclusively) for recitation in the *majlises* organised for mourning the death of Husain. No less important than the art of composition was the art of *marsiyakhwani*— the dramatic recitation of the poem before an audience. Often the great poets excelled in both. Many stories are told of Anis's powers of recitation, and the way that during his performances he would often find himself in a state of ecstasy. It is said that on one occasion so many people came to hear him that the walls of the enclosure, where the *majlis* was due to take place, had to be torn down to accommodate the large crowd. Anis is said to have possessed such a powerful voice that even those sitting farthest away from him could hear every word distinctly.

Like many of his famous Lucknow contemporaries, Anis was a man of regular habits and was generally loath to change his way of life. He took daily exercise, rode and fenced. He was on the tall side, wore large moustaches and a neatly trimmed beard. He dressed meticulously, never going out without his *angarkha* (a light, embroidered over-jacket) and his dome-shaped Lakhnavi topi. Once he was invited to Hyderabad by Sir Asman Jah Bahadur to conduct a *majlis*. The organisers, however, were keen that he should wear a turban in the Hyderabad fashion, but even when offered the vast fee of Rs 10,000, he still refused to do so.

During his lifetime, Anis rarely ventured outside Lucknow. After the fall of the Kingdom of Avadh in 1856, like so many of his fellow citizens, he was forced to go elsewhere

in search of patronage, visiting Patna in 1859 and then Hyderabad. He died in 1874 A.D. His poetic works consist entirely of Urdu *marsiyas* and other shorter compositions on the subject of the battle of Karbala. His contemporary, Mirza Salamat 'Ali Dabir, himself a composer of fine Urdu *marsiyas*, whose name is usually closely linked in literary histories with that of Anis, composed a chronogrammatic epitaph for his friend, whose work he genuinely admired:

Mount Sinai is bereft of Moses
and the pulpit of Anis

Muharram is still celebrated in Lucknow and elsewhere much in the way described above. For the first 10 days of the month, Shi'as (and some Sunnis as well) fast or eat only very simple food, and regularly attend the morning *majlises*. On the 10th day, paper replicas of the tomb of Husain, known as *ta'ziyas*, are paraded through the streets of the town and are taken to one of the many *imambaras* or 'Karbalas' for ritual burial. Celebrations also take place at the great Imambara, built in Lucknow by Navvab Asaf ud Daula in the 18th century, and at the Shah Najaf, an ornate replica of the tomb of 'Ali, who was buried at Najaf in Iraq. Rivalry between Sunnis and Shi'as on this day is such that when their respective *ta'ziya* processions meet, over-zealous fights can ensue, and it is not uncommon for a temporary curfew to be imposed upon the city!

Throughout Muharram, but especially on the 10th day, a number of colourful (and sometimes distasteful) acts of mourning (*matam*) occur, one of the most famous being the

Ag ka Matam ('The Mourning of Fire'), in which the faithful are invited to call upon the name of Husain and walk barefoot on live embers, strewn across the courtyard of the Asifiya Imambara. Others in which people cut themselves with knives, and flagellate themselves with chains to which sharp blades are attached (sometimes sustaining serious injury) are also popular, though now usually frowned upon by more enlightened people. According to what seems to be a peculiarly Indian tradition, Husain's elder son, 'Ali Akbar (or according to some, Qasim) is said to have been married at Karbala (cf verses 80–81). For this reason in Lucknow on the eighth day, a boy dressed as a bridegroom is seated upon a caparisoned elephant, and songs known as *mehndi* (literally 'henna', applied to the hands and feet of brides and bridegrooms) are composed for the occasion.

The *Marsiya* and Its Characteristics

The following *marsiya*, which is one of Anis's best known and most often quoted compositions, is a complete account of the battle of Karbala from the early morning, when the heroes wake up and prepare for war, to the late afternoon, when Husain is finally martyred. It culminates with Zainab's impassioned cry to the soul of her dead brother, before she is led off into captivity by the enemy.

Technically, the *marsiya* is supposed to be divided into a number of set sections according to a scheme devised by Dabir's poetic mentor, Mir Muzaffar Husain Zamir, at the beginning of the 19th century.

According to this scheme, the *marsiya* would first contain an introduction, in which the scene is set with a description of the morning, the difficulties of the journey to Karbala, and verses in praise of God and the Holy Prophet. This would be followed by verses in which the heroes take their leave of Husain before departing for battle. Then comes the description of Husain or one of the heroes mounting his horse. Here elegant verses in praise of the horse —such verses often form a statutory part of other kinds of Urdu panegyric poetry— would be written. The most important parts of the poem are those which follow. These give an account of the exploits of the hero's ancestors, and then a detailed description of the battle itself. This should contain verses in praise of the hero's sword, in the case of Husain the miraculous Zulfiqar, which wielded single-handed deals death and destruction to an enemy numbering thousands. The poem concludes with sections on the final martyrdom and the mourning for the dead hero.

Poets rarely follow this scheme as set out in the text-books, and although many *marsiyas* contain most of the elements described above, it was not felt obligatory to introduce them in strict sequence or to include them all. Verses in praise of the horse and the hero's sword, however, are usually found, and provide the poet with the opportunity to display his talents to the full.

Perhaps one of the most notable features of the *marsiya*, which would at once strike a western reader, is the lack of realism and the apparently blatant contradictions which occur in the poem. For example, Anis sees no difficulty in

describing the desert, where his heroes are suffering from the heat and the most appalling thirst, as a green and verdant garden planted with luxuriant trees, where nightingales sing perched on the dew-filled roses (verses 15-17). Some modern Urdu critics, who are over enthusiastic in pointing out the 'shortcomings' of their own literature *vis-a-vis* that of the West, have often made the same reflection, deploring the 'Oriental' taste for exaggeration, frowned upon by their British mentors, who often had great difficulty in coming to terms with the beauty of such a complex and rich language! It should, however, be borne in mind that such lavish descriptions would have delighted rather than disappointed Anis's audience, and even now would be regarded by most people as testimony to the poet's great art. The fact that they lack strict realism would be considered irrelevant, and, of course, it can always be argued that it is Husain's divine presence which transforms the desert-sands of Karbala into such a wonderful paradise.

Exaggeration, word-play and puns, oxymorons and the occasional forcing of normal syntax are features to be found in the Urdu poetry of most periods, but are most often associated with the poets belonging to the so-called 'Lucknow School', such as Insha, Atish and Nasikh—contemporaries or near-contemporaries of Anis. During the first decades of the 19th century, Lucknow was an opulent city of great culture, equally renowned for its fine buildings, beautiful gardens, and not least for its highly refined dancing-girls and singers. Poetry, in which the mode of expression is all important, is a natural product of such a

society, which it closely reflects.

The *marsiya* writers, who aimed to dazzle an already ecstatic audience with their excellent command of language, idiom and rhetoric (features often referred to in the poems themselves—cf verse 7) put all these devices to good use, and sometimes indulge in the most extraordinary flights of fancy. Because of Husain's presence, the lowly desert of Karbala appears to be higher than the Empyrean itself, and Saturn, the planet in the seventh heaven, is mystified to see a 10th and hitherto non-existent sky above him (verse 22). The heat, which Husain valiantly suffers, is so burning that the pupils of the eyes, with blisters on their feet, are forced to take refuge behind the fragrant-grass screens of the eyelashes (verse 118). Salamanders, which normally prefer the hot sun and shun water, now hide themselves with the fish in the waves of the Euphrates, which turn into skewers in order to roast them. Examples of such amazing metaphors, which have always been, and still are, very much a part of Urdu poetry, can be multiplied *ad infinitum*.

Something which disturbs the more orthodox readers of the *marsiya* is the great adulation given to Husain and his relations. Among the string of epithets applied to him we find; 'Lord of the World', 'The Master', 'The King of Heaven', 'The Ruler of Creation', 'The Monarch of the Faith'. Some would argue that such titles are fit for God alone and should not be awarded to any mortal. In his exploits, Husain is paramount, and incapable of being slain or defeated until he chooses the time. In other words, he seems to be master of his own life and destiny. As we have seen, any place

where he stands is exalted, even above Heaven itself.

Such hyperbole is perhaps legitimate in verse and similar examples can be found in the works of the great poets who preceded Anis. The 18th century poet Sauda, the most important part of whose work consists of *qasidas* or panegyrics in praise of famous men both religious and secular, indulged in the same kind of exaggerated description. On more than one occasion, Sauda, who was a Shi'a, endows not only Ali and Husain, but even unprincipled political governors, like the infamous Imad ul Mulk of Delhi, with divine attributes. Sometimes he pulls himself up, noting in his verse that he really is in danger of going a little too far. The verses, however, were not withdrawn from the poem, and have always been included in published editions of his works.

It is well known that a writer can go much farther in poetry than he could ever go in prose, and even now poetry containing thinly disguised criticism of the government can often pass the eye of the censor. The sermons of Shi'a *zakirs*, delivered during Muharram from the pulpit, however, usually contain the same high-flown exaggeration as the *marsiya*, and this is often found to be distasteful or even heretical by the orthodox.

The main purpose of the *marsiya* was to remind people of the sad events of Karbala, and hence, as far as Shi'as are concerned, of their own plight and treatment, which at various stages of history has amounted to persecution. Thus, an important aspect of the *marsiya* is the unashamed pathos, which is achieved in a number of ways. The final

two lines of the six-line stanza are those to which the audience would react most strongly, and these often contain a terse and poignant summary of the rest of the verse. Every opportunity is taken to mention the pathetic state of the little children, with an emotive, simple Urdu phrase like *yih nanhe nanhe bacce*, 'those tiny little mites', suffering from the heat and cruelly murdered by the arrows of the heartless foe. The women, like Husain's sister Zainab, are made to speak in a simple, almost colloquial form of Urdu, which everyone, who had heard an angry mother or a grief-stricken sister, would instantly recognise. Husain's reasonable and elegantly worded entreaties are met with gruff insults from an uncultured enemy, who lounges under a parasol, fanned and fed by servants, while Husain suffers from unbearable thirst.

The audience, consisting mostly of convinced Shi'as, would of course be thoroughly acquainted with all the events described in the poem, and would have heard them repeated over and over again since childhood. Even now, however, the pathos achieved by the great *marsiya* writers like Anis rarely fails to produce genuine tears and sincere exclamations of grief, even among people with little or no formal education. The language, allusions and figures of speech employed by the *marsiya* writers are undoubtedly difficult, and may even present a challenge for many well-read Urdu speakers who have not been brought up in the tradition. The range of vocabulary is truly vast, and some of the Arabic and Persian expressions, which fit well into the context, often fail to appear in some of the best Urdu

dictionaries. Tradition and constant attendance at *majlises* from childhood, however, provide a special education required for appreciating the poetry, and although it would be an exaggeration to say that a Shi'a peasant from a small town in eastern Uttar Pradesh would be able to understand every word, he may be able to provide a clearer explanation than an educated Sunni from the city, on whose life Muharram has only marginally impinged.

Some years ago, I attended a *majlis* in a village near Jaunpur (eastern U.P.), given by a famous *zakir* from Lucknow. The audience was large, consisting mainly of farmers and labourers. The *zakir* spoke clearly, but apart from taking the trouble to translate the Arabic quotations into Urdu, made no special attempt to simplify his language. In spite of the April heat, the audience listened spell-bound for well over three hours. Conversations with the people afterwards revealed that little of the *zakir's* rhetoric had been lost on them, and many were able to give clear and detailed accounts of the art of the *marsiya*. Everyone I spoke to had heard the name of Anis, and some, who otherwise had only a hazy idea of the rest of Urdu literature, could quote verses from his poems. One elderly gentleman claimed to have seen Anis in Lucknow, a fact of which he was inordinately proud!

The Characters of the *Marsiya*

The following list contains in more or less chronological

order the names of all the characters mentioned in this *marsiya*:

Husain's side

Hashim	Great-grandfather of Muhammad. The family of the Prophet is often referred to as 'Hashimite'.
Hamza	Paternal uncle of Muhammad.
Muhammad	The Prophet of Islam.
Ja'far	The cousin of Muhammad. He was killed in the battle of Khaibar (629 A.D.), where he bore the standard of the Prophet. When he lost his arms in battle, God replaced them with jewelled wings. Hence he is referred to as 'The winged Ja'far'.
'Ali	Muhammad's kinsman and, later, son-in-law. Father of Hasan and Husain. According to Shi'as, the first Imam.
Fatima	Daughter of Muhammad; wife of Ali; mother of Hasan and Husain. Frequently referred to as Zahra ('The Pure').
'Aqil	Paternal uncle of Husain; brother of Ali.
Muslim	Son of Aqil; Husain's cousin. Killed at Kufa by ibn Ziyad.
Hasan	Elder son of Ali and Fatima.
Husain	Younger son of Ali and Fatima.
Bano (Shahr Bano)	Daughter of a Persian king; wife of Husain.

Umm ul Banin	Mother of Abbas.
'Abbas	Younger half-brother of Husain; elected as the standard bearer of Husain's army; filled the water-skins at the Euphrates.
'Ali Akbar	18-year old son of Husain.
'Ali Asghar	6-month old son of Husain.
Qasim	Eldest son of Hasan (13 years old); traditionally said to have been married at Karbala to Fatima Kubra.
'Abdullah	Young son of Hasan.
'Aun and Muhammad	Young sons of Zainab; grandsons of Ali and Ja'far, both killed in battle; in this *marsiya* they are refused their request to take the standard into battle (verses 55-71).
Kulsum	Young sister of Husain.
Fatima Kubra **Fatima Sughra**	Young daughters of Husain.
Sakina	4-year old daughter of Husain.

Yazid's side

Hur	A brave soldier of Yazid's army, who crossed the lines and joined Husain.
Yazid	Son of Mu'aviya, the governor of Syria, belonging to the Umayyad tribe; succeeded his father, 'tyrannised' Iraq, and challenged Husain at Karbala.

'Ubaidullah Ibn Sa'd	Governor of Kufa; struck the decapitated head of Husain with a spear.
'Umar Ibn Sa'd	A general of Yazid's army.
Hurmila Ibn Kahil	An archer of Yazid's army.
A'var Salami	A soldier of Yazid's army.
Azraq	A famous Syrian wrestler.
Sinan Ibn Uns	A soldier of Yazid's army.
Hind	Yazid's wife.

The Epithets of the Main Characters

It is sometimes stated that the Urdu *marsiya* has some of the characteristics of epic poetry as we know it from the works of Homer and the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*. In those poems we also find lengthy descriptions of battles, swords and horses written to a formula, and accounts of action going on in heaven simultaneously with that passing on the earth. In Homer, for example, the Gods on Olympus discuss the progress of the Trojan War and are affected by its vicissitudes in much the same way as the houris and the angels comment on the events which are taking place at Karbala. The comparisons, however, should not be taken too far, and much of what is contained in Anis's *marsiyas* can be found on a smaller scale in the Urdu poetry written by his predecessors. Especially interesting is the use made

of recurring epithets, special adjectives and descriptive phrases, given to the characters, which serve to identify them. The following are the most common:

Muhammad	Prophet; Messenger; The Prophet of Allah; The Refuge of the Prophethood; The Best of Men; Mustafa ('The Chosen One').
'Ali	The Lion of God (Asadullah), Haidar (the Arabic word *asad* means 'lion'). The Father of the Dust/The Dusty One (a name given to Ali by Muhammad); Murtaza ('The Chosen One').
Fatima	Zahra ('the pure'). The Handmaiden; The Best of Women.
Husain	The King; the King of the Faith/World/Universe; the King of Hejaz; the Master; the Lord; the Lord of the Two Worlds; the Traveller of Karbala; the Martyr; the Leader; the Imam; the Sayyid ('descendant of the Prophet'); Shabbir (a pet-name given by Muhammad), and many variations on these titles.
'Ali Akbar	The Image of the Prophet (whom he resembled in looks), the Muezzin ('the one who calls the prayer').
Zainab	The Daughter of Ali; the Sister of the Imam; the King's True Sister.

There are many other particular epithets as well as a number of general ones, such as: 'of fine temperament', 'rosy-cheeked', 'red-faced' (in the sense of 'honourable'), 'moon-faced' and so on, used to describe Husain's men.

Yazid's side usually attracts epithets like: 'tyrannical', 'black-faced', 'black-hearted', 'stony-hearted', 'vile', 'filthy' and many other synonyms for 'wicked'. Husain's horse has a number of epithets denoting swiftness, and his sword, Zulfiqar, those denoting sharpness, brightness and flash.

An extremely common comparison, which occurs over and over again, is that of Husain to a bridegroom about to be united with his mystical bride in heaven. His clothes are perfumed like that of a bridegroom; he wears a wedding garland made from the flowers of death; he leaps into battle like a bridegroom leaping upon his bride; his sword is as loath to leave its scabbard as a bride her newly wedded husband; unsheathed, his sword stands ready for action. Such references are so common that it has been suggested that Anis, perhaps subconsciously, connected the bridegroom's sexual prowess with Husain's daring actions in battle. Mystical comparisons of the lover being united with his earthly beloved to the soul's union with God are very frequent in all Urdu poetry, but the directness of some of Anis's remarks in a highly religious context is perhaps a little surprising.

The Translation

Until very recently, Urdu poetry has always been rhymed and written in strict conformity with the rules of metre and prosody, which it inherited largely from Persian. Although blank verse with no apparent metrical pattern is gaining some currency, many, if not the majority of, modern

Urdu poets still employ the traditional classical forms for their verse.

As we have already pointed out, the *marsiya* is written in six-line stanzas (the classical form known technically as *musaddas*), rhyming AA AA BB. This form was found particularly suitable for lengthy narrative poems and was also employed by the 19th century poet, Altaf Husain Hali, for his famous poem, entitled *The Flow and Ebb of Islam*, which is commonly referred to as the *Musaddas-i Hali*.

Unlike English rhythm, which is ordered by stress, Urdu metre is quantitative, i.e., it depends upon the pattern of long and short syllables in the line. Once the metre is determined, no licence is permitted, and each line of the poem will have exactly the same metre as the first. Discerning audiences are very particular about metrical regularity, and will at once recognise and vociferously castigate any slight mistake.

In translating this *marsiya*, I have kept rhyme throughout the poem, departing slightly from the original by employing the scheme AB AB CC, which is well attested in English verse. No attempt has been made to imitate the original metre exactly, since this would be well-nigh impossible in a language with the phonetic structure of English. The iambic pentameter, which has been popular with English narrative poets from the time of Chaucer, seemed to fit best, and is not so different from the metre which Anis has employed.

As we have already pointed out, the language of the *marsiya* is very rich and grand, and most people would agree

that it is probably the most difficult found in Urdu literature. It is in fact the language of the 19th century Lucknow nobility, whose delicate, formal speech came to be acclaimed as the epitome of high-breeding and manners. Even now in a very different world, those whose ancestors were born in Lucknow still pride themselves on their fine Urdu, and can have a very supercilious attitude towards lesser mortals who had the misfortune to have been born elsewhere!

Urdu, basically an Indian language, which readily absorbed grammatical structures and vocabulary from Arabic and Persian (themselves extremely rich languages), possesses a vast number of synonyms. For words like 'horse', 'sword', 'battle', 'desert' etc., which naturally frequently feature in the *marsiya*, more than half a dozen Urdu words might be found for each, and, of course, they will be used by the poet wishing to display his linguistic virtuosity. English, though a rich language, is in comparison with Urdu often found wanting. This presents the greatest problem to the translator, who must needs make the best of what he has at his disposal.

The stately, formal verse employed in the *marsiya* requires similar language in the translation, and there are many ways of doing this in English. I have, however, tried to avoid obscure or trite archaisms, which would seem amusing rather than grand, even though the fortunate rhyme that some of these words provide is a temptation. At least there are no lines like the one found in an American(!) translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*:

Forsooth, my chuck, the morrow's
maund is dight.

Very often in Urdu poetry, normal word order and syntax can be violated for the sake of metre or simply for effect. With inflected languages like Urdu this is easier to do without obscuring the meaning, since, because of the existence of grammatical case, it is always clear which is the subject and which is the object of a sentence. Violation of word order also occurs in English verse, though certainly not to the extent that it does in Urdu. Therefore, no attempt has been made in this translation to imitate this feature of Anis's poetry.

Word-play is another highly regarded feature of Urdu verse, and very often the more ingenious a pun the better. In spite of the fact that teachers and commentators, as early as the beginning of the 18th century came out against this practice, which was imitated from medieval Persian poets, their advice seems to have had little effect upon their followers. Puns, which are not fashionable in 'serious' English writing, are, of course, impossible to translate from one language to another. In many cases I have, therefore, been obliged to abandon the Urdu pun, giving what I hope is an acceptable English equivalent, but one that is not absolutely literal.

Here the whole of Anis's *marsiya* is translated and care has been taken to convey the sense of the original as accurately as is possible in a verse translation. It is hoped that some of the beauty and grandeur of Anis's writing has remained.

The English translation is meant to stand by itself, and therefore an extensive commentary has not been provided. For those who seek a little more clarification of historical or stylistic points, some brief notes, marked with * in the margin of the English text, are given at the end. These are, however, not essential for the understanding or enjoyment of the poem as a whole.

The Battle of Karbala

The sun had run his journey o'er the night;
Unveiled, the Dawn revealed her glorious face.
The King who rides the heavens saw her light
And called his brave companions to their place.
'The time has come at last: to God give praise;
Arise! In fitting prayer your voices raise.

1

Brave hearts! For strife and slaughter dawns this day;
Here the blood of Muhammad's race will flow.'
Zahra's darling, honoured, seeks the fray;
The night of parting fades 'neath union's glow.
'We are those for whom the angels weep;
To live this day we sacrificed our sleep.

2

This morning brings an evening ever blessed;
We who depart for Paradise will slake
Our thirst by Kausar's spring, and there find rest.*
May God exalt our names for honour's sake.'
Unequalled, each of them to joy gave birth.

If Moses, who called God on Sinai,*
Had seen their light that with the vision jars,
He would have swooned. Celestial majesty
Was echoed by the birds' song in the bowers
Of the desert valley filled with fragrant flowers.

11

That dancing brilliance wafted by the breeze!
The russet satin sky was put to shame.
Rosy dew-drops hung on swaying trees;
Diamonds were abashed and pearls found blame.
Each bush was crowned by glittering diadems;
The leaves of every tree wore precious gems.

12

How fine the art of the Creator's pen!
On every leaf embellishment was shown;
A skill beyond accomplished poets' ken,
Which to the simpler mind remained unknown.
All stood in awe of the Lord of Servants' craft;
Enamelled richness o'er the valley laughed.

13

The light, the fresh, cold desert and the sky!
The pheasant, quail and peacock made their call;
The sweet-voiced birds intoned their plaintive cry;
The morning breeze brought coolness to the soul.
Red petals clothed the trees and sought their arms
Then gathered in the ditches round the palms.

14

The desert and the morning breeze that blew
Amid the branches swaying in the bowers,
Scattering on the blooms rare drops of dew,
One nightingale addressed a thousand flowers.
The primroses of Zahra's garden drank
The dew, collected on the rosy bank.

15

The ring-doves gathered round the cypress tall;
The pigeons cooed: 'The Lord alone holds sway!'
Then came the cry: 'Our God is blessed by all.'
The birds pursued their worship in their way.
Not only flowers sang their adulation;
The tongues of thorns gave praise in exultation.

16

Lifting up its hand, the ant cried out:
'Oh Cherisher of the weak, who rule our fate!'
'Eternal One! Almighty!', came the shout,
'There is one God, and He alone is great.'
The deer called in the woods, the birds in the air;
The jungle lions roared within their lair.

17

And here amid the thorns the Prophet's flowers
Imparted fragrance to the desert lands;
The house of Fatima faced its last hours
In the garden planted by Muhammad's hands—
This garden cut down in those ten sad days,

By traitors wasted, cruelly set ablaze.

18

Ah God! The autumn and the flowers of spring!
Muhammad's sons could scarcely hold their breath.
Like bridegrooms they had dreamed of joy to sing;
But their red garlands were the blooms of death.
Awake all night, their eyes were drunk with sleep.
Their perfumed smiles caused closed buds' hearts to leap.

19

The glory of that russet-coloured tent!
A fresh sky o'er the earth had been unfurled.
To the canopy no pole's support was lent;
This ancient house! Faith's pivot in the world.
For Allah's loved-ones dwelt beneath this sky
Like stars in the empyrean on high.

20

The desert land smiled mocking at the skies;
The seventh heaven thought it dwelt above.*
Its curtains were the veils of beauties' eyes,
And heaven plucked its stars from it with love.
The morning thought the sun a wretched sight
When it compared it to that desert's light.

21

Then suddenly the dawn's white light came in,
To lead the prayer the King came from his throne.
All stood behind the Lord of Men and Jinn;

Ali Akbar called the prayer in Hasan's tone,
The eyes of everyone were filled with tears.
As if the Prophet's voice fell on their ears.

22

The birds fell silent; trees in ecstasy
Rocked to an' fro: their buds and fruit sang praise.
The towns and deserts joined in harmony,
And ocean-beasts emerged to hear their lays.
The darling of Shabbir to all lent weight:
O'er land and sea they cried: 'Our God is great!'

23

The women of the King wept bitter tears;
While Bano of renown stood silently,
Zainab repeated blessings with her prayers:
'My muezzin, I give my life to thee!*
They call in praise of God; oh, hear their joy!
As beautiful as Joseph is my boy.

24

He reads from the Quran: what majesty!
His grandsire once for speaking held the prize.
Ah, may his voice remain eternally!
The strains of David, who was called The Wise!
Those melodies like petals of a flower!
A nightingale chirps in the Prophet's bower.

25

Let someone take these blessings on my part;

May God protect him from the evil eye!
His eloquence would capture any heart,
Although for two long days his throat is dry.
In foreign lands misfortune strikes Husain.
Three days of hunger torment him with pain.'

26

'Make ready for your worship!', came the cry.
'The King of all Creation leaves his seat.
In ranks of light the Leader passes by;
Salvation's path bows down to touch his feet.
His radiance in the highest heaven will reign.'
The Quran became a prayer-mat for Husain.

27

The company's prayers were verses from that age;
Like *bismillah* the King stood at their head;*
The ranks were lines of writing on the page,
And proudly stood behind the one who led.
The dawn blinked at the whiteness shown between
The rows of words that Ali once had seen.

28

They magnified the Lord in glorious tune;
All heaven's angels blessed them for their sake.
In faith their faces shone bright as the moon;
In fear of God their limbs began to quake.
Their necks were bowed in humble adulation.
Like the crescent moon they folded in prostration.

29

Haidar's scions, Muhammad's noble kin,
Eighteen brave young men stood in one place;
All peerless, righteous, humble, free of sin,
The friends of the Imam in wisdom's grace.
Theirs the praise of God in all directions.
Theirs the beads that told their benedictions.

30

They stood, then bowed; their prayers flew to the sky:
To the One Existing Lord they showed devotion.
Prostrate upon the ground, their time passed by;
Their hands, their arms, their feet betrayed no motion.
But of their own dire plight they made no word.
They prayed beneath the shadow of the sword.

31

They raised their heads and pointed to the air;
The gates of heaven received their adulation.
Their hands, the pinions of the bird of prayer,
To the trembling sky sped on their supplication.
In humble pose they fell upon the ground;
In Gabriel's domain their words passed round.

32

The prayer of the King of Men was now complete;
His thirsty friends came forth to shake his hand.
One kissed his cheek, another touched his feet;
What stalwart spirits had this hungry band!
His soldiers pledged their faith with every breath;

Embracing on the feast day of their death.

33

Here one fell upon the ground in thanks;
Here the Quran was read in doleful strains.
Praise of the Prophet echoed in their ranks;
Here power to the Almighty 'mid their pains.
Husain cried out: 'Have pity on our plight:
On us who thirst and hunger in our flight!'

34

Here sad laments and pleading supplication;
But there oppression, cruelty, wicked deeds.
Umar, son of Sa'ad cried, 'Keep your station!
Watch the river, guard the banks and meads!
Husain is without water for two days.
Let him not drink a drop until he pays.'

35

The Celestial King gave orders from his place.
When arrows suddenly began to fall.
Towards the evil foe he turned his face.
Weighing his sword Abbas obeyed his call.
Like moths around the torch of the Imam,
They rallied to protect Husain from harm.

36

To Ali Akbar he made this behest:
'On treachery our evil foe is bent.
Life of my soul, go where the women rest,

And lead them from the forecourt to the tent.
Through negligence let no child come to grief,
For Asghar's neck is the target of the thief.'

37

The Sky-Throned King had thus addressed his son,
When Fazza cried from the porch: 'Behold our plight!
Oh Lord, now where may Ali's daughters run?
The children have been crying through the night.
Suffocated by the heat they weep,
But now in the morning breeze they go to sleep.

38

Baqir rests, Sakina is in a swoon;
This feverish heat our babies has oppressed.
In tears they sleep, their faces like the moon.
Weak from hunger. Where to give them rest?
Theirs is no fault. Why do these arrows rain?
They seek the coolness of the breeze in vain.'

39

Hearing her voice, the Heavenly Lord arose;
'Neath shields his comrades took him to the porch.
He cried: 'We part for battle with our foes.
Prepare the horses. Light our righteous torch!
May our hearts rejoice in Paradise today;
Make haste to force this issue in the fray.

40

With these brave words, the King of Land and Sea

Went over to the women. In the ranks
His men prepared. Abbas, renowned and free,
Paced to and fro, a lion with armoured flanks.
The lightning of his face flashed on the sand;
His shield aloft, his sword gripped in his hand.

41

Solomon's crown was humbled by his helm;
The wings of Huma were envious of its plumes.*
His gauntlets would fair Victory overwhelm;
God save us from his anger when it looms!
When a brother wards off tyranny and wrong,
Will not his brother's heart feel safe and strong?

42

The King beheld the women's piteous state;
Their hair hung loose, their faces pale and white.
Zainab made a prayer: 'Oh God Most Great!
Save Fatima's darling in this awful light.
May Rano's crop be green and fresh with sap;
And may she nurse new offspring in her lap.

43

At Karbala the traveller is undone!
An assault upon a Sayyid, loved by all!
In foreign lands can battle e'er be won?
Have mercy on these babes so frail and small.
They die of hunger; thirst has plunged its sword.
They are Your Holy Prophet's family, Lord!

44

Neither Ali nor the Prophet has been kept
To lead this house so cruelly laid to waste;
For Fatima we mourned, for Hasan wept;
Husain alone remains in kingship placed.
Have mercy! Spare the Refuge of our band!
Our company is lost without his hand.'

45

Drawing near, the Lord of Heaven spoke:
'Be not thou troubled. All thy prayers are heard.
Our cursed foe all faith and pledges broke,
And now they will learn justice at my word.
This is no time, my sister, for thy tears.
Bring forth the holy relics. Cease thy fears.'

46

Zainab brought the clothes the Prophet wore
When he went to Heaven on that night.
Husain put on his turban, and once more
He donned the cloak to which he had the right.
Those holy garments fitted perfectly;
The scarf of Fatima, his legacy.

47

The glorious turban flaps hung down unfurled;
Like jasmine-perfumed locks they graced his face,
And on his shoulders rested black and curled.
Cathay and far Khotan renounced their place.
Musk and ambergris could not compare

With the scented spikenard twisting in his hair.*

48

The Prophet's fragrance wafted from his train.
No bridegroom knew such perfume from a bride.
Haidar, Fatima, Hasan, Husain
The scent of the Holy Five on every side*
Was squandered on the vale: the swaying flowers!
In Paradise Rizwan rocked in its showers.*

49

The King of Time had donned this fine array;
His sister, blessing him, began to weep:
'Ah Haidar, Hasan! Where are you today?
We roam abroad; where does our mother sleep?
My sweetest Joseph now from us will part;
I die; ah, may the Prophet bless his heart!'

50

The box of arms was opened by the King:
Zainab, chaste and holy, beat her breast.
The armour wrought in heaven began to sing
The prayers inscribed upon the Leader's chest.
The beauty of its jewels shone out afar
And every link was like a gleaming star.

51

When Zulfiqar, the mighty sword, appeared,
The King of Heaven kissed its hilt with love.
He weighed it in his hand, and Glory cheered:

'I bow to thy magnificence above.
May victory be thy lot, may triumph flow,
And may thy strike fall squarely on thy foe!'

52

He fixed the sword that he alone could wield;
The crescent moon grew frantic in the sky.
Up to his shoulder mounted Hamza's shield,
Whose dignity increased when raised on high.
The mark of Prophethood was its proud gain
From being on the shoulder of Husain.*

53

The Lord of High and Low in arms was dressed;
The Sayyid's standard stood before the band.
The women, hair dishevelled, were distressed;
His sister clutched the pole with trembling hand.
With swords bound to their waists, on battle bent,
The sons of Zainab came before the tent.*

54

Those rosy cheeked young boys with valour trod.
Their cloaks tucked in and sleeves rolled up for war.
The might of Ja'far and the Lion of God;
In stature small, but valiant all the more.
They rubbed their eyes upon the flag and sighed
In ecstasy to clasp the pole they tried.

55

They eyed the standard, looked with hopeful eyes

Towards their mother, praising loud the King;
Then taking counsel, sure to win the prize
Quietly said: 'From thee we ask one thing.
Who carries Ali's emblem to the fray?
Who bears our grandsire's standard there today?

56

For when the King takes counsel, let him know
We have the right, although we dare not ask.
Politeness tells us that we should be slow
In coming forward for this glorious task.
We love and serve the Master of Creation,
But also hope to gain our reputation.

57

Great heroes in the Prophet's army fought,
But Ja'far gained the greatest honour then.
On Khaibar's field all great distinction sought,
But Ali took the standard of his men.
We may be thirsty, but we fight like lions.
Of Ali and of Ja'far we are scions.'

58

Zainab answered: 'What is this to you?
Can I advise or sway the Lord of Men?
Please know your place. Accept that which is due.
I shall be angry if you speak again.
Now stand aside, clasp hands and show respect.
Ali Akbar stands alone through your neglect.

59

Move aside. Go by the standard. There!
Make sure our Heavenly Master does not see.
You come and drive me mad. Now is that fair?
Your behaviour is not good. Please let me be!
You cry, but I can do no more nor less.
As far as I'm concerned that's childishness!

60

You're babies. Still you crave the highest place.
Well, find a way of putting on some years.
But I admit there's courage in your face.
No one can match you from amongst your peers.
This issue must be weighed up carefully.
No one receives what is not meant to be.

61

The standard was not made for hands so small.
You are the youngest, though you think
you're wise.
Before the Prophet's Grandson you must fall.
This is your duty; here your glory lies.
You wish to fight, but what can be attained?
Today in death alone is honour gained.

62

What if your forebears won that rich reward?
Do you think it good to steal their reputation?
Real qualities are those shown by the sword.
Let Haidar guide you; aim at Ja'far's station.
You do have Ali's blood, but do not boast.

Be worthy of that title midst the host.

63

How did the Winged Ja'far gain renown?*
The standard was the Prophet's gift he took;
And when he drew his sword and brought it down,
The lands of Syria and Turkey shook.
And when he lost his life that Son of Kings,
Instead of arms God gave him jewelled wings.

64

For three whole days their army faced defeat;
Then Ali bore the standard to the field.
The Lion of God put Marhab to retreat;
The foe within the fortress would not yield.
But he broke down that door of infamy
As if it were a leaf plucked from a tree.

65

Now, Ali's noble son, in ambush caught,
Beholds our mother's garden laid to waste.
And you forget to ask why I'm distraught.
Incensed by rank and honour you make haste
To win for your own name a reputation.
For me you spare such scant consideration.'

66

The rose-faced boys in deference clasped their hands:
'Oh, Sister of Husain! Control thy wrath.
No further talk of standard on these sands.

But thou wilt see our worth when we go forth
To rout the foe, then sleep where martyrs fall.
You will say we were the bravest of them all.'

67

Her loving sons thus spoke; she drew her breath,
And then as the tears welled up within her breast,
She cried: 'You give me tidings of your death;
But wait and by your mother's hand be blessed.
You scorn your mother's words before you part.
Why do you plunge this dagger in my heart?'

68

The King drew near to Zainab and thus spoke:
'My sister, didst thou hear what thy boys said?
They are the lions which fearsome spirits broke.
By such unequalled hearts are armies led.
Compared to the bravest ones who passed before,
Their frown is different and their courage more.

69

Just ten years old! What purpose they display!
Such stubbornness in ones so young is rare.
May dearest fortune smile on them today.
At whose breast were they suckled? By whose care
Were they brought up to grace the Prophet's name?
But they are young. How can I meet their claim?

70

The bearer of the standard is thy choice.'

'The King of Heaven must choose.' Zainah replied,
'Thou wert declared our mother with one voice',
Answered Husain, 'the day that Fatima died.
So now must thou decide; for thee to say
Which one will bear the standard to the fray.'

71

Zainah answered: 'I can do no more.
For thou art Leader of the Strong and Weak,
And after the Quran thy word is law.
But if it is thy will that I should speak,
Then I would choose the brave Abbas. For me
In valour no one stands as high as he.

72

He loves thee; he is thine obedient slave;
A younger brother who will give his life
For thee, and fight with strength among the brave;
A worthy son in time of war and strife;
A lion-hearted general, good and fair.
With his great courage no one can compare.'

73

The King who has no equal found his voice,
As tears came to his eyes: 'To thee my thanks.
My sister, thou hast uttered Ali's choice.
Go call Abbas, the terror of the ranks.'
Akbar called his uncle reverently:
'The King awaits. My aunt has chosen thee.'

74

Abbas came in the presence of the King.
'Go to thy sister', said Husain. 'She chose.'
Zainab placed the standard in the ring.
Taking the flag the Lord of Heaven arose:
'Here is the standard thou alone mayst lift.
For thee the Holy Ones reserved this gift.'*

75

He clasped the pole and to his Master bowed,
Then filled with glory touched his sister's feet.
She blessed him, saying: 'Brother I have vowed
My life to thee. Protect me from the heat
Of battle. Go and bring us peace today,
And guard thy brother in this awesome fray.'

76

Abbas addressed his sister: 'While my head
Remains upon my neck, be not distressed.
Though a hundred-thousand swords on us be sped,
They will not pierce this shield, my stalwart breast.
The sons of the Lion of God to action rise;
They fight with lions and tear out their eyes.'

77

To Ali's tomb he turned his noble face:
'Behold each atom has become a sun!
Ah, Lord of Dust! Have mercy on thy race.
Before Husain to martyrdom I run.
My head will fall to save thine only peer;

My blood and sweat are shed upon Shabbir.'

78

Hearing this, Abbas's wife drew nigh,
At first, she looked with coyness at her spouse.
She blessed Husain and Zainab with a sigh,
And said: 'These sufferings my grief arouse.
But such reward that you have now bestowed
Makes great the honour which we are not owed.'

79

Zainab laid her head upon her breast,
And said: 'I pray thy womb may e'er give life.'
She answered: 'May my Lady's name be blessed.
Let children be thy fortune as a wife.
May Ali Akbar pass his wedding night
Here 'neath the stars that make this heaven bright.

80

May destiny ensure their safe return.
Let the cry go up in Yathrib for the Lord.*
May dear Umm al Banin with honour burn.
My joy on Ali Akbar's bride be poured.
May henna red his hands and feet adorn.
May his wedding greet the shadow of the morn.'

81

The little girl, Sakina came and said:
'Where is my uncle? Tell me, why this throng?
Let me place my blessings on his head.

May he be saved by God from harm and wrong.
He takes the standard; may his fame be mine;
For he is Ali's glory, Ali's sign.'

82

'Come, my dear', Abbas smiled through his tears.
'You're thirsty, and I did not stop to think.'
Sakina answered: 'No, allay thy fears.
Thou hast the standard now, but we must drink.
Go, fill my water-skin. No other boon
I crave from thee. Bring water. Bring it soon!'

83

Hearing her words, the Sayyid women cried.
Qasim came near and called to the Imam:
'The Syrian army masses with its pride
And fast approaches, bent on doing harm.'
Husain replied: 'No cause for fear this day!
Abbas will bear our standard to the fray.'

84

Standard in hand, Abbas to action fell.
The barefoot women ran with hair dishevelled.
The Lord cried: 'Brood of Mustafa, farewell!
We part. 'Tis time the scores were duly levelled.
This is the morning of the night of sorrow.
Our fading stars unite to greet the morrow.'

85

Grief-stricken, Zainab fell before Husain;

And Rano, stumbling, fell before her son;
Trembling, Kulsum fell, her heart in pain;
Sakina, Baqir fell down one by one.
The garden was despoiled, no gay flowers danced;
The standard like a funeral bier advanced.

86

The celestial Lord Abbas with firm intent
Strode out; the soldiers said their last farewell.
The King of Both Worlds left the women's tent,
But Zainab's piercing shrieks he could not quell.
His heart was pained; tears washed his eyes anew,
As when a sun-flower's face is washed with dew.

87

Just like Muhammad, mounted on his steed,
Husain attached his quiver to the rein.
The tongues of men and Jinn cried out: 'Indeed,
The Prophet's horse descends to earth again!
His graceful movement shames the mountain-quail;
His face that of a bride beneath her veil.

88

Behold the way his eyes flash, stern and bold!
How proudly struts and sways the noble horse!
His limbs were fashioned in a perfect mould.
He stops and pricks his ears up in his course.
His neck the fairies' hands would fain caress.
Swift as Huma he sports his comeliness.'

89

The wind began to blow: the horse advanced
With joy towards the desert, gaining strength;
The cavalry took their reins; their horses pranced;
The standard, like a cypress fair in length,
Came forth to Iram's garden midst its bowers *
To Karbala, the land of desert flowers.

90

The five pronged emblem's radiance robbed the sight;*
Its gleaming was reflected on the sand:
It lit the high empyrean with its light—
A bridegroom's face veiled in a golden strand.
The emblem and the sun shone in both ways,
Entangling in the air their brilliant rays.

91

God's chosen army of magnificence!
The infamous enemy flags began to droop.
Brave Hashimites with rare munificence,
Adornment of the earth, an honoured troop.
Each one the seed of Ali, each in price
Was dearer than the groves of Paradise.

92

Those eight young boys, fair-faced, straight-backed and wise
With awesome strength and grit were Haidar's scions.
Black locks entwining their narcissus eyes,
With little knives they were a match for lions.
Their moon-like breasts for arrows were the snare.

They came like bridegrooms to a place of prayer.

93

The houris from their windows in delight
Called out: 'Bless the Imam and bless his sword.
The earth this day presents a wond'rous sight.
For he resembles Mustafa, our Lord.
The banner of Abbas goes forth unfurled.
The company of the Prophet rules the world.

94

For when the Holy Prophet left his place,
We thought the world bereft of beauty's charm.
But let the old bent sky now hide his face!
Ali Akbar lives to be Husain's right arm.
Just see his comely looks and know his worth.
Muhammad in Heaven; his shadow on the earth.'*

95

Suddenly arrows rained upon the horde.
Husain advanced and pleaded with his foe.
His thirsty friends came to protect their Lord;
They struck the Syrian force and laid it low.
With swords held high, the fight was underway.
All strove like Malik Ushtar in the fray.*

96

The King's companions, bent on Holy War,
Raised cries: the earth began to shake with fear.
Fierce lions against foxes to the fore!

The cursed foe in panic to the rear!
To north and south fell lightning on the flanks
And pierced the black clouds of the Syrian ranks.

97

Now Ali's grandsons fought with might and main.*
Their daggers had the force of Zulfiqar.
On shield and shoulder savage blows would rain
The wounded, dead and dying lay afar.
They proved themselves to be the Prophet's scions;
Nursed by the milk of Zainab, they were lions.

98

Those tiny little hands, those wrists so white;
Their speed created havoc in the field.
The enemy bowmen broke their ranks in fright,
And pleaded with the Prophet's men to yield.
In them Muhammad's strength was manifest.
'Twas Zainab's milk that fed their lion-like breasts.

99

Qasim, Hasan's son, so bravely fought;
Surrounded, he roared like an angry beast.
Three days of thirst and hunger were as nought.
With unveiled face no bridegroom to his feast
E'er ran so hard as he attacked his foes
And dealt the Syrian Arzaq hefty blows.*

100

The sword of brave Abbas flashed with such power

That Gabriel sought protection from his Lord.
The son of Sa'd there faced his final hour
'Midst shieldless corpses scattered by the sword.
As lions spring to gain the river banks,
Abbas swam through the waves of serried ranks.

101

The guards of the Euphrates lost their heads
And like the river's current flowed away.
Black-hearted foes were tossed into its beds;
Their life-breath burst like bubbles in its spray.
Abbas, dry-lipped, took water for his men,
As if the Prince of Arabs fought again.

102

Ali Akbar seized his victims with a frown,
Like a hungry lion pouncing on its prey.
The proud were vanquished, mighty men put down;
His adversaries o'er the desert lay.
Their heads were severed; no one dared to pass
Beyond the lines defended by Abbas.

103

On both sides swords rained down till past midday.
The earth and skies resounded with the crash.
With folded wings the angels looked away.
No more the shouts, no more of swords the flash.
The shields were spent; the spears now joined the fight;
By afternoon the army was in flight.

104

Husain brought back the corpses of his nation;
No martyr's head was severed by the foe.
May no man suffer such dire tribulation!
He cried: 'Alas! Where do their spirits go?
The weight of mountains has been thrust on me.
Such fine array men's eyes will no more see.'

105

'Mid dead and dying stood the lone Imam.
The Prophet's cloak was soaked in crimson gore.
Dejected, anxious, thirsty, in alarm,
He heard their victory drums; the enemies' roar
Proclaiming slaughtered martyrs broke his heart;
It pierced his spirit like a poisoned dart.

106

Only he who grieves can understand.
The garden of life's toil now wasted lay.
No rest from lamentation's cruel hand.
The lamps were out that once burnt bright as day.
Scattered limbs exposed to searing heat;
On Ali Akbar's corpse there was no sheet.

107

The King of the Age moved slowly to the tent;
He could not bring his thirsty lips to speak.
Lifting the flap, he cried: 'My heart is rent!
My sister, it is Asghar that I seek.
Now bring him from his cradle to the door.

I long to see his moon-like face once more.'

108

Muhammad's women ran to him unveiled,
And Zainab brought the baby in her arms.
He took the child, by pangs of love assailed;
And kissed him, overcome by infant charms.
The knife of grief cut through Husain's sad breast;
His holy knee afforded Asghar rest.

109

He cradled Asghar in his warm embrace.
Outside in ambush lurked black Kahil's son,*
Who fired a three-pronged arrow from his place;
It's target was the neck of the little one.
The baby writhed in pain; the Leader cried;
The tiny child was slaughtered by his side.

110

The baby died, and in the earth about
A little grave was fashioned by the sword.
The child was buried, and Husain cried out:
'Oh Holy Ground, be mindful of thy ward!
This love of Ali, keep him in thy care,
Ali's pledge and Fatima's treasure rare!'

111

He spoke and donned his shining arms once more;
His eyes were bloodshot, and his face was red.
Clothed in the Prophet's cloak, now bent on war,

With Hamza's shield alone to fight he sped;
With Zulfiqar, that sword of might and fame;
Muhammad's armour graced his noble frame.

112

Was it Rustam clothed in armour or his steed?
The fiery, faithful horse was swift and fleet.
A bridle, gold and silver, was its lead;
Elixir was the dust raised by its feet.
The blood of Duldul fair pulsed through its veins;*
Submissive when the Master took its reins.

113

The days of summer heat defy description.
My tongue burns like a candle if I try.
God save us from the blast of its inception!
The field was red, and yellow burnt the sky.
Cold water was the wish of this poor band,
As flaming winds poured fire upon the sand.

114

The vehemence of the sun, its cruel glare!
The face of day was burnt and black as night.
The Alqama dried up; its banks were bare;*
Its bubbles burst and from the heat took flight.
The spring of life was dry; its work was done.
The Euphrates steamed and boiled beneath the sun.

115

Four-footed creatures sheltered in the lake;

With fish the salamander made its home;
The deer were languid, cheetas would not wake;
The molten rocks became a waxen foam.
The red flew from the rose, green from the glade;
In wells the water dropped in search of shade.

116

There was no tree that still bore flowers or fruits;
The date-palms were on fire like the chenar.*
No smiling rose drew moisture from its roots;
Thorns grew on branches burnt as black as tar.
No limb could stir, no beating heart would race;
All nature bore a pale, consumptive face.

117

The beasts cowered in the places that were wet;
Birds hid themselves within the forest trails.
The pupils of the eye were bathed in sweat,
And would not peep outside their eyelash-veils.
If one glance came to stand upon the street,
A thousand blisters formed upon its feet.

118

The lions would not emerge from their wild dens;
Dust hung around the hazy sun's wide girth.
Gazelles all sought the refuge of the fens.
The firmament caught fever from the earth.
From pain of heat it uttered mournful sound.
Seeds roasted if they fell upon the ground.

119

The whirlpool on the water spun with flame;
From burning bubbles sparks of fire would leap:
The tongues of waves were dry; no solace came
To crocodiles which languished in the deep.
The rivers blazed as if on Judgement's Day.
And roasted fish upon their billows lay.

120

The mirror of the sky was scorched with heat.
And lightning dashed for shelter in the cloud.
Hot-tempered men could scarce stand on their feet.
For morning's camphor cried the sun aloud.
The dome of elemental fire burnt red,
And clouds to even colder regions sped.

121

In that great heat the King of Nations stood;
The standard's shade, the Prophet's arms no more.
His sighs were flames, his tongue was hard as wood,
His lips were grey, his back was bent and sore.
Three days deprived of water, now he stuttered;
His tongue tripped over every word he uttered.

122

The enemy riders let their horses drink;
They led their camels to the watering-places;
The birds refreshed themselves upon the brink,
And water-boys rubbed moisture on their faces.
A pious act to care for bird and beast!

Husain, so thirsty, looked upon their feast.

123

A golden parasol for Ibn Sa'd!
His servants fanned him as he sat; and now
The ground was splashed with water by his guard.
But for Husain no shade to cool his brow.
The blazing sun beat down upon his back;
His blessed countenance was burnt and black.

124

The son of Sa'd called: 'Lord of Heaven, think!
Give me allegiance, for I mean no harm.
A cooling draught shall I give thee to drink.'
Husain replied: 'Ah wretch, respect Islam!
The son of Ali takes no gift from thee.
From thy hand water is but dust to me.

125

For if I asked, then Abraham would come
And fill my cup from the fount of Salsabil;*
Wouldst thou give me to drink, oh filthy scum?
With avaricious tyrants would I deal?
Thy very shadow causes flowers pain.
If thou art cut, no blood pours from thy vein.

126

And if I called, Jamshed would give his cup;*
The Prophet would tell Gabriel to bring
A draught from Kausar's spring for me to sup;

On earth the angels would my victory sing.
At my command the world would cease to be,
Iraq and Syria sink beneath the sea.'

127

He spoke and gazed on Zulfiqar's bright blade.
The son of Sa'd fell back, alarmed and shy.
From enemy ranks an arrow-charge was made;
The sound of war drums sped across the sky.
The horsemen massed; their spears were poised for war;
Black flags adorned the black-faced army's roar.

128

The clamour of the drums, the trumpets' cry!
The angels' ears were deafened by the din.
And from its senses all the earth did fly,
As armoured soldiers with their spears moved in.
With shields upon their heads came this vile band,
Like rain-clouds swooping on the desert sand.

129

Intoning martial verses, Ali's scion
Advanced with Gabriel's hand upon his shoulder.
Onward he advanced— a male lion—,
With sleeves rolled up; each step he took grew bolder.
The bride of battle was in splendour wreathed;
Husain's intrepid sword was now unsheathed.

130

The flaming sword was wrenched out of its cover,

As moonbeams fly, as perfume leaves the rose,
As a comely maiden taken from her lover,
As breath departs the breast, as red blood flows.
When thunder roared and all the air did swell,
Laila swooned and from her litter fell.

131

Husain swooped like an eagle from on high,
As lions in the jungle pounce on deer.
The heavens flashed; the clouds began to cry;
His horse rushed down like water swift and sheer.
The sharp sword cut the foe with thunderous crash;
They fell like mountains 'neath the lightning's flash.

132

The sparks flew from the sword that cut and thrust,
Heads were severed in the wind that blew.
It beat upon the armour, raising dust.
The wings of Gabriel stretched out and flew.
Those wings were like a charm that all men saved,
For on them Ali's name stood out engraved.*

133

The foe on whom the sword fell split in two;
The blade came down again to make him four.
The path it took was the one Death pointed to;
However hard its task, it craved for more.
No rider in his saddle could be found,
The armour's chains lay scattered on the ground.

134

Its strike beheaded that tumultuous horde;
Assembled ranks were shattered by its flight;
Each body's castle fell beneath the sword,
And houses crumbled 'neath its torrent's might.
Whoever struck the scimitar fell dead:
Its lustrous sharpness made the streams run red.

135

Ah God, the river and the sheet of flame!
Fire on water, water set ablaze!
The sword sped onwards, whispering God's name;
Its current woke the still pools from their daze.
It quivered and the evil spate was snared.
With Zulfiqar's keen sharpness nought compared.

136

The centre, flanks and wings, both left and right
Of the murderous army by Husain were crushed.
The earth was spinning as the sword took flight.
From lifeless bodies all the spirit gushed.
Their souls left like those guests that part in haste;
The market closed; the city was laid waste.

137

The horsemen bore the sword's almighty speed;
It cut them through and split their horses' girth.
It thirsted after blood and did its deed.
And bloody corpses choked the heavens and earth.
No need it had for grindstone or for flint;

From land to sky all space shone with its glint.

138

This sword of autumn spoiled the garden's bloom.
Torn from its scabbard now it craved no home.
Faithful has for faithlessness no room.
Do those exalted with the lowest roam?
Straightness in its curve, and sharp its tongue;
The power to cut upon its breath was hung.

139

It struck the breast, the heart was bathed in blood;
The fingernails of Death plunged in the flesh.
The cry 'God save us!' poured out in a flood.
It cut down honour, then it struck afresh.
Ten steadfast men could not brook its attack;
Its flaming fire turned all their faces black.

140

Ranks collapsed on ranks where'er it struck,
Now this way, that way, dashing through the air.
'Where has it gone?' 'Which warrior did it pluck?'
The cries came. 'It is here!' 'No, it is there!'
The archers could not find the way to go.
If heads were severed, bodies did not know.

141

Those by the water washed their hands of life.
And hands of headless riders lost the reins.
A hand was struck; a heart was plunged in strife.

No hands were left to grab their horses reins.
They fain would hide their faces in their hands;
But, shamed, their feet took off across the sands.

142

Ah, how they feared the Lion of Creation!
The stream of the Euphrates turned to bile.
Their cruel hearts were racked with consternation;
They could not run, nor could they stay awhile.
'Run!', came the cry, 'before it is too late.'
The river of God's wrath was in full spate.

143

Although the watery fish were armour-clad,
They hid themselves in fear, mouths open wide.
In whirlpools spun the shields; the waves were mad;
The crocodiles sought corners dark to hide.
The river would escape the sword's white heat.
But bubbles formed like blisters on its feet.

144

Divine destruction was the sword's swift blow.
'God help us!', came the cry. 'What can we do?'
Through helmets, then through breastplates it would go,
Then on through saddles, slicing steeds in two.
And when the sword into the ground was thrust,
The Earth cried: 'Save me, Ali, Lord of Dust!'

145

The bowmen, pressing hard, died in the fray.

Their arms hung loose; their bow strings still were taut.
The horn was cut, their arrows flew away;
One step onto the field and they were nought.
The bird of vain imagining took flight;
The notches on their arrows gaped in fright.

146

All those who were in archery renowned
Could find no place of refuge but the grave.
And those whose target-shot was always sound
Groped blindly for the life they could not save.
Those archers of perdition, sore misled,
Mistook the arrow's notches for its head.

147

The lines fell upon lines, and flanks on flanks;
Riders fell on riders, steed on steed.
For five that fled, ten fell among the ranks,
And heralds were despatched with awesome speed.
The army broke and tyranny was dashed.
So rare to see a foe so cruelly lashed.

148

The Lion of Karbala was now enraged.
To Karbala for refuge wolves had fled.
What war in Karbala the sword had waged!
At Karbala fell many a severed head.
The villages became abodes of ghosts.
Mounds of corpses towered above the hosts.

149

The Warrior King struck panic in his foe,
And turmoil broke beneath the ancient sky.
The bowstrings looked for refuge in the bow;
For help the bow to arrow-heads made cry.
The ruthless sword drove on, and everywhere
The enemy sought a respite from its glare.

150

From twanging bowstrings arrows sped like rain;
Hurtling from the Syrian cloud they poured.
The piebald horses, chestnut steeds in pain
Whinnied as the sweltering hot winds roared.
The hatred of the desert was on fire;
Husain alone withstood its clamorous ire.

151

Water-carriers came and called their wares:
'The market-place is brisk!' 'Come cool your hearts!
The wicked, mindful only of their cares,
Rushed to the water-boys like poisoned darts.
A blazing fire consumed the world of pain.
All drank their fill except the Lord, Husain.

152

Such thirst assailed him 'neath those burning skies;
He masked his face and cried in desperation.
The sun's sharp glare assaulted his poor eyes,
But still he leapt and fought with exultation.
Rare beads of sweat poured down his holy face;

Pure pearls cascaded on the battle-place.

153

But those who slaked their thirst just slunk away.
The sword of Ali led the fight alone.
It flashed upon the scalp in full array.
Stopped by neither shields nor iron nor stone.
The blade of the Creator knew no thirst;
In front of it the helmets' blisters burst.

154

The enemies were confused, and could not tell
An arrow from a bow, such was their plight.
The archers seeking refuge fled to Hell;
Their quivers shuddered as they took to flight.
No sooner had they tried to grip their bow,
Their heads were off; their bodies were laid low.

155

The horses jostled riders when they saw
The sword flash by; in fear they jumped and leapt.
Not one in thousands stood this battle raw;
Among the ranks there was no order kept.
From every side the shout of 'Scatter!' 'Flee!'
Swords turned their faces from the misery.

156

From the stamping of the horses sand flew up:
The firmament filled like an hour-glass.
The dark-blue sky became a dusty cup,

And blackness spread o'er valley, hill and pass.
The glow that lights the world was lost from sight;
The afternoon at once had turned to night.

157

The prowess of the Lord against his foes!
With sunlight on his swarthy face he strode.
His dry cracked lips were petals of the rose;
Like Ali borne by Zuljanah he rode.*
Came clamour from the battle, fierce and harsh:
'Run off! An angry lion stalks the marsh.'

158

'Husain! Make haste to save us!', came the cry.
'Husain contests the banks; the swamp he takes.
Husain fights with the wrath of God on High.
The world is his; in him God's spirit wakes!
Husain saved Noah from the dreadful flood.*
May we be saved by Ali Akbar's blood!'

159

The name of Ali Akbar reached his ears;
His heart was pierced; he pulled his horse's rein.
And as he stopped, his eyes were filled with tears;
He addressed the spot where his dead son had lain:
'Life of my soul! They call you from afar.
The battle ends; I lay down Zulfiqar.'

160

Ibn Sa'd cried out and slapped his knee:

'Ah shame! His victory becomes defeat!
Behold the hero! Such brave men as he
Should never lead themselves to base retreat.'
Then one of Ibn S'ad's strong men cried out:
'This prize is mine! I'll put Husain to rout!'

161

He was gigantic, ugly, fat and dark,
And brazen-bodied with a waist of iron;
Of Death his quivered arrows bore the mark;
His shield had smashed the teeth of many a lion.
His heart was evil and his soul corrupt;
At his every step a mountain would erupt.

162

Another giant like him in form and height,
With bushy, beetling brows and dark-blue eyes,
Stood by his side, depraved and full of spite.
In battle he slew foes of wond'rous size.
One boasted of his club and one his sword.
They girded up their loins to slay the Lord.

163

To paint this awesome fight I need resolve;
To gain my enemies' praise the power of speech;
A sword-sharp tongue its hardness to dissolve;
A pen of steel its forcefulness to teach.
To draw the battle-ranks amassed for war
The inkpot needs the flash of Zulfiqar.

164

The anguished soldiers stood, their faces white;
The bravest of them trembled, for they feared
Husain might bring his sword into the fight.
Could Marhab stand his ground if Ali dared?*
Could Antar keep his head in such a fray?
Who has defeat or victory today?

165

A voice from Heaven cried out: 'In Allah's name!
Oh Lord! Oh Darling of the Arab race!'
The King was mounted, mindful of his fame;
His sword rose up and showed its gleaming face.
The shameless giant pressed onwards like a flood,
But Zulfiqar was thirsty for his blood.

166

In battle stalwart soldiers staked their lives,
And evil frowned upon the earth beneath;
Their thunderous shields, their lightning-flashing knives
Were drawn against the horse that gnashed its teeth.
It beat its hooves; those cowards sought retreat,
The earth supporting cow shook on its feet.*

167

The selfish giant came brandishing his spear
Against Husain, but little served his might.
At once the sword was raised into the air;
The tyrant's arrows from its strike took flight.
They might have hit a rock; their heads were dashed;

The string that fired them broke; the bow was smashed.

168

The tyrant raised his club in fresh attack;
The Scion of the Dusty One saw red.
He beat his hands in wrath; the giant fell back,
As lightning struck upon his angry head.
Defeat for evil! Victory for the just!
His head now severed fell upon the dust.

169

Confused and scared he tried to run away,
And groping took his sword in his left hand.
But Death's cold hand will always find its prey.
And Zulfiqar sliced through him on the sand.
A miracle the way the sharp sword flew!
The rider and his horse were cut in two.

170

The second giant approached; the King called out:
'Hast thou not seen the power of Zulfiqar?'
The wretch came on, regardless, with a shout.
But Death already called him from afar.
Summoned by the voice that knows no laws,
Another victim for the lion's jaws.

171

The King of Faith towards his rival turned,
As if a hungry lion had joined the fray.
With nonchalance the enemy's sword was spurned.

The sky was split; the heavens spun away.
The giant sank in the saddle without a sound;
His mighty horse was pressed into the ground.

172

The peaks of Qaf sped from the fairies' sight;*
The Jinn were lost; the lions strayed from home;
The denizens of the deep dashed to the light;
The hawk and partridge fled where pythons roam.
The mountains huddled, hiding, from the roar,
And eagles fell from eeries where they soar.

173

A voice came from the sky: 'All hail, Shahbir!
This sword was made for him. Shahbir, all hail!
All hail! To him was battle's honour dear.
Nursed at his mother's breast, how can he fail?
God gave him mastery o'er all creation.
For he alone could fight to save his nation.

174

But now enough! No more, Husain! No more!
'Tis time to rest. The horse pants from the heat.
The time for prayer draws nigh. The battle's roar
Is over now for thee. No more! Retreat!
No one can fight thus, thirsty in the throng.
Attend to thy dear kin, and soothe their wrong.'

175

Sheathing his sword, the King cried: 'I obey!'

The Day of Judgement came upon the world.
The enemy stood like animals at bay.
Their arrows fixed, their standard's flag unfurled.
Husain stood helpless. See and you will know
Your helpless Lord alone before his foe!

176

Ten thousand arrows dashed upon his chest;
A hundred at one time sought out their prey.
The spears transfixed his side and pierced his breast;
Ten stuck for every four he pulled away.
The Shadow of the Lord was filled with spines,
Like needles in the backs of porcupines.

177

From all directions arrows poured like rain;
Assassins rushed with spears and daggers bared.
Such pain befell Husain. Such pain! Such pain!
The one who on the Prophet's lap was reared.
No one to pluck the arrows from his chest.
No one to lift him to his place of rest.

178

Midst thousands, one afflicted stood, alas!
The noble son of Fatima, alas!
Shabbir was struck by tyrants' spears, alas!
And arrows pierced his holy skin, alas.
That ragged, angry army, honour's bane,
Poured out its bristling quivers on Husain.

179

Those who had fled from battle now returned;
One took a stone and aimed it at his head.
The blow struck home; his fevered forehead burned;
Then to his throat a three-pronged arrow sped.
He touched his forehead, clasped his throat and sighed.
The arrow flew out from the other side.

180

This arrow had three heads, so it is told;
It pierced the Lord, not stopping in its track.
His breathing stopped; his eyes wide open rolled;
He tried to pull the shaft out from his back.
His final breath emerged—an angry flood—;
The palm placed on his wound was filled with blood.

181

A'var Salami, an enemy of the King,*
A foe of true Islam, now played his part.
He split his forehead with a mighty swing;
Sinan, the son of Uns, speared through his heart.*
Another plunged his stomach with a hook.
The grave of the Prophet's Refuge sighed and shook.

182

Husain falls from his mount—calamity!
His holy foot falls from the horse's girth.
His side is gaping open—misery!
He swoons; his turban drops upon the earth.
The Quran has fallen headlong from its stand.

The Ka'aba's walls have crumbled into sand.*

183

Far from the wastes came Fatima's pure voice:
'Muhammad! See our family despoiled!
Now who will save our friendship and rejoice?
Against what tyranny our Leader toiled!
Full nineteen-hundred wounds were on him thrust;
Ah Zainab! Come! Husain writhes in the dust.'

184

Now Zainab moved the curtain of the tent
And came with unveiled face and heaving breast.
Her limbs were trembling and her back was bent.
She cried: 'Ah Karbala, where is thy guest?
From thirst I suffer; guide me with thine eyes.
And bring me to his corpse, to where it lies.

185

The whole world is in darkness at my feet.
For Allah's sake, stay with me at my side,
Where lies our Sayyid writhing in the heat?
Ah mother, lead me to the place he died!'
Her sighs consumed her blazing heart with flame.
A voice was heard: 'Who moans and calls my name?'

186

Who called: 'Oh sister! Do not come this way!
The time for thy departure is at hand,
For Allah's sake, go home! Lost is our day.

May Ali save the ship of this poor band.
Let not Husain be left in this cruel waste.
To drape his corpse let Fatima make haste.'

187

Her head uncovered, Ali's daughter walked
To the place where Ali's darling son was slain.
She ran, though by the evil enemy balked,
And reached the spot, clutching her breast in pain.
Ignoring every danger, she drew near,
And saw her brother's head stuck on a spear.

188

Then Zainab, overcome with sorrow, cried:
'Ah Sayyid! Let me bless thy blood-soaked face.
My brother's throat was slit. See how he died!
Dids't thou forget thy sister's healing grace?
Our house is robbed; the promise was not kept.'*
His moving lips took God's name as she wept.

189

'Thy sister greets thee, brother. Answer me!
Hear the cry of Haidar's daughter's strife.
With thy dry tongue give answer! Hear my plea!
Should Zainab cling to this accursed life?
For Death alone can end this separation.
No one is left to give me consolation.

190

My brother, can I bring thee back once more?

What can I do? Where can I tell my woes?
To whom can I recount the pain I bore?
Our city is now ruled by evil foes.
The world has been destroyed beyond belief.
How can I live within this house of grief?

191

Why did this wretched waif not die before?
Come tell me how the dagger ripped thy breast?'
A voice cried: 'Do not ask the pains I bore!
For all that came to pass was for the best.
Now from all tribulations I am free,
But ah! the wound to be apart from thee!

192

For even now the foe is bent on plunder.
Give nought but thanks to God for thy dear life.
When tyrants come to set our home asunder,
Take care of poor Sakina in her strife.
Protect my daughter in thy warm embrace;
Let no one look in anger on her face.'

193

Enough, Anis! Your very limbs are quaking.
This monument you built with glory rings.
Such verses written while your hands were shaking
Will fire the world and please the hearts of kings.
Their harvest is this gathering of mourning
The spring-like pleasure of the autumn's dawning.

194

Notes

Verse

3 *Kausar*: the name of a spring in Paradise.

8 *angels born of air*: angels are traditionally said to have been born of air, men of dust and Jinn of fire.

9 *Father of the Dust*: Muhammad gave this name to 'Ali when he made his ritual ablutions with sand, permissible when there is no water at hand.

11 *Moses on Sinai*: Moses ascended Mount Sinai in order to see the face of God. He fainted before the divine effulgence.

21 *the seventh heaven*: the seventh heaven is regarded as the highest. Here the desert land of Karbala is exalted by being imagined to be above it.

24 *muezzin*: the person who calls the prayer (*azan*) usually from the minaret of the mosque. 'Ali Akbar is always credited with a sweet voice.

28 *bismillah*: the first words of the Quran: 'In the name of Allah'. Here Husain is imagined to stand before his

people like the first words on a page of the Quran. Those standing behind him are arranged like the lines of writing on the page. The whiteness of their clothes is like the whiteness of the paper.

42 *Huma*: a bird of Persian mythology.

48 *Cathay and Khotan*: far-off lands in China, renowned for their perfumes.
spikenard: an aromatic plant found in India. Its twisting shoots are often compared to curly black hair.

49 *The Holy Five*: the 'Five Holy Ones': Muhammad, Fatima, 'Ali, Hasan and Husain, known as the *panjtan*.
Rizwan: the gatekeeper of Paradise.

53 *The mark of Prophethood*: the Prophet had a birthmark on his shoulder, which was considered to be the mark of his prophethood. The shield gains dignity by ascending to Husain's shoulder.

54 *the sons of Zainab*: the young boys, 'Aun and Muhammad, who in spite of their tender years desired the honour of taking the standard into battle, as their grandfathers, Ali and Ja'far had done in previous campaigns.

64 Ja'far was killed in the Battle of Khaibar, a fortified territory to the north-east of Mecca, where the Muslims defeated the Jews (629 A.D.). In the battle his arms were cut off. In their place he was given jewelled wings. The next verses refer to the Battle of Khaibar.

75 *The Holy Ones*: the *panjtan* (verse 49 above).

81 *Yathrib*: the old name of the city of Medina.

Umm al Banin: the mother of Abbas.

henna: a red paste applied to the hands and feet of a bride and bridegroom.

There is a tradition in India that 'Ali Akbar was married at Karbala.

90 *Iram*: a fabulous garden in Arabia, renowned for its beauty and freshness. Here it is compared to Karbala.

91 *the five-pronged emblem*: an emblem, usually made in the shape of an outstretched hand (*panja*), fixed on top of the standard. It represents the Five Holy Ones.

95 *Muhammad in Heaven*: referring to 'Ali Akbar, who is said to have resembled the Prophet in looks.

96 *Malik Ushtar*: 'The Master of the Camel', a renowned companion of the Prophet.

98 *Ali's grandsons*: 'Aun and Muhammad (verse 54 above).

100 *Arzaq*: a warrior of Yazid's army, killed by Qasim.

110 *Kahil*: Hurmila ibn Kahil, an expert bowman of Yazid's army.

113 *Rustam*: a hero of Persian legend, renowned for his great club.

Duldul: a mule of Muhammad, which he gave to 'Ali.

115 *The Alqama*: a tributary of the Euphrates.

117 *chenar*: an Indian tree, whose leaves turn bright red in autumn.

126 *Salsabil*: A fountain in Paradise. During the month

of Muharram, water or sherbet is set out at places along the road for thirsty travellers, in memory of Husain's suffering. The stalls set up are known as *sabil*.

127 *Jamshed*: a legendary Persian king, who possessed a cup in the bottom of which he could see the future.

133 *The wings of Gabriel*: Gabriel is said by the Shi'as to have the names of 'Ali and Husain engraved upon his wings.

158 *Zuljanah*: the name of 'Ali's horse.

159 *Noah*: There is a popular legend that Noah called upon Husain to save him from the flood.

165 *Marhab, Antar*: two of Yazid's best fighters.

167 *The earth-supporting cow*: the earth is imagined to be supported on the horns of a cow, which in turn is supported on the back of a fish swimming in the primordial ocean.

173 *the peaks of Qaf*: fairies are supposed to inhabit the Caucasus mountains, known in Arabic and Persian as Qaf.

183 *Ka'aba*: the sacred enclosure at Mecca, containing the black stone — the Holy of Holies of Islam.

189 *the promise*: it is said that, in his childhood, Husain promised Muhammad that he would save his people.